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THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE IN THE HIGH SCHOOL

NORMAN F. COLEMAN
Reed College, Portland, Ore.

Although the English Bible has been generally recognized as the most important book in our history, both for general culture and for special moral stimulus, there seems to be a widespread belief that there are insuperable obstacles to its use in our public schools. Is this belief well founded? Some years ago at the suggestion of one of his pupils the present writer introduced a course in the literature of the English Bible in a public high school. Its introduction and continuance were so entirely unopposed, and it met with such quick response in interest and appreciation, that it seems worth while to tell the story.

It was in the city of Spokane, in the year 1904. The student who started the movement was a boy in the eleventh grade, alert, active, venturesome, something of a leader among his fellows. He had been talking in thoughtful mood with one of his classmates, and came to me to ask why the Bible might not be studied in our school as well as other masterpieces of literature. He knew a number of students who would be glad to enter a class for its study. At first I was somewhat surprised and doubtful, but the more I thought the more I could see no reason why parts of the Bible might not be studied by high-school students with as much interest and profit as attended the study of Shakespeare and Milton. I consulted the principal and the superintendent. They could see no objection and asked me to go ahead and plan a semester's course. I did so and announced it as open to election by students of the eleventh and twelfth grades. I explained that only those should enter the class who wished to study the Bible as nearly as possible without prejudice, with the first object of discovering what its writers really wished to say, just as we studied Milton. I further stated that any questions might be asked and discussed

in the class which sought to reach the writer's purpose and to make clear his meaning. Over twenty students elected the course, most of them boys, and a number of them boys of marked individuality and independence, leaders in student activities. The course was taught during six semesters. Under my successor it was more popular than it had been under me, in fact the number of students who might enter the class had to be limited; and it was discontinued only because the teacher was promoted to the principalship of a new high school and there was no one at hand to continue it.

The popularity of the course was not due to its being easier than others; it called for a great deal of reading and much thinking. Its plan was suggested by Professor Moulton's *Literary Study of the Bible*, and it included the following elements: (1) narratives: selected chapters from Genesis, Exodus, and the Books of Samuel and Kings, giving the stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and David; (2) idylls: the Book of Esther and the Book of Ruth; (3) orations: the earlier and later chapters of Deuteronomy; (4) lyrics: the Song of Deborah, the lament of David over Jonathan, and selections from the Psalms; (5) wisdom literature: selections from Proverbs and Ecclesiastes; (6) the Book of Job. This plan was modified from time to time. Once the Song of Songs was added, and once or twice selections were made from the prophets. These were not very successful: the students were scarcely old enough to appreciate the emotional warmth of the former, or the complex social and political background of the latter. In the attempt to concentrate study and to relate the ancient writings to permanent human interests and to present-day problems, questions were assigned in advance upon each day's lesson. For instance, on the story of Jacob these questions were asked: Might Jacob have justified himself in his deal with Esau by saying, "Well, if he didn't want to sell his birthright for the pottage, he didn't have to"? "How do you account for the change from the Jacob who thought only for himself when he left home, to the Jacob who cared first for "the mother with the children" when he returned? On the Book of Ruth: Why is this called the Book of Ruth rather than the Book of Naomi? Is there any justifica-

tion in the story for the picture of Ruth given in Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale"? On the Hundred and Fourth Psalm: What can you tell from this poem of the land in which its author lived? Compare his knowledge of the sea with that of the author of the Hundred and Seventh Psalm. On the Prologue to the Book of Job: Does Satan appear among the Sons of God as an intruder or as one who rightly belongs with them? What is his business? Does Job's submissiveness under desolating affliction seem to you natural? Give reasons for your opinion.

The class was as varied in membership as any other in the school. It had members of Unitarian and Jewish as well as of devoutly orthodox training, while some of its members had very slight religious interest and one professed to be agnostic. Yet sectarian animosities never appeared in the class discussions. The writings were studied as revealing and criticizing human life, and in the honest effort to understand the revelation and the criticism sectarian prejudices were apparently forgotten.

The members of the class were generally industrious and thoughtful. The easiest parts of the course were not the parts they liked best. They were asked several times to say what study had been most interesting and had seemed most worth while. Always the majority voted for the Book of Job. The most striking fact in the attitude of most of the class was their eager admiration for moral strength and heroism. No situation impressed them more deeply than Job's triumph over his own apparent utter destruction in his confident assertion, "Yet shall the righteous hold on his way, and he that hath clean hands shall wax stronger and stronger."

This experiment in high-school English is now far enough away in time for me to see it clearly and in perspective. The course and the way in which it was taught were very imperfect, yet it seems to me to have been a decided success. I consider it now as I did then, and as I know my successor did, of unusual promise in comparison with other courses in literature for high schools. The deepest issues of life are moral issues and the most difficult judgments are moral judgments. Here was human utterance so

serious, so varied, so simple and direct as to bring sharply to the consciousness of boys and girls on the threshold of manhood and womanhood the great personal and social problems that are common to man in all times and places. Where else in literature is the transforming power of love and labor depicted so clearly and with such restraint as in the story of Jacob? Where else is the brotherly relation so simply and so broadly treated as in the story of Joseph? Where else are the issues that determine the life and death of nations so directly and powerfully presented as in the orations of Moses? Where else is loyalty to truth in the face of overwhelming odds so grandly portrayed as in Job's struggle to keep his soul? Why should not these be offered to high-school students as well as the *De Coverley Papers* and the *Merchant of Venice*?

From what the students said of the course at the time, and from what some have told me since, as men and women in homes and with business of their own, I know that they also regarded it as of great value. It gave them welcome opportunity for the frank discussion of those issues of life whose importance seems to be sometimes the excuse for their neglect. The Bible literature class was for them a place of comradeship in ways of thought and feeling where too often the young adventurer in the world of men walks uncertain and alone. The comments of the students upon the course showed unmistakably that in many cases it had opened to them a new world, a world of moral earnestness and spiritual aspiration such as their young eyes could scarcely discover in the stir and haste of a modern city.

The city in which this took place is not unusually moral, neither is it unusually indifferent to what is taught in its schools, yet never from first to last was there heard a word of protest against this teaching of the Bible in its public high school. This story is written in the hope that other teachers in other schools may repeat the experiment. An interested and sympathetic teacher, with ordinary preparation and tact, may, through such a course as this, open to boys and girls the book from which Cromwell gained strength, from which Lincoln learned wisdom.